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Add Blueberries to the Landscape

The Gulf Coast is the home of a special group of blueberries known as the rabbiteyes. They differ from the highbush types that grow farther north in that they are native, and therefore more tolerant of our short, mild winters and sandy soil.

Almost any home landscape could use some blueberry bushes. They not only produce fruit, but help to provide an environment that attracts and holds wildlife in the yard. They contribute to diversity in the landscape, help to provide needed layered vegetation and have a growth habit and plant size that is attractive to several species of song birds.

The ideal time for planting blueberries is fast approaching. Following are some tips for establishing and growing them.

✍ Blueberries require a well - drained soil profile of at least 18 inches in depth. Where water stands within 18 inches of the soil surface for prolonged periods during the rainy season, blueberries should be planted on raised beds. Generally, blueberries will thrive in landscapes where azaleas and camellias perform well.

✍ The best time to plant blueberries is from mid - December to mid - February. Plants that are about 2 feet tall with well developed root systems that are not pot bound are best.

✍ Set plants at the same height that they grew in the nursery. The top of the root ball should be even with the top of the ground when planting is completed. Blueberries are very shallow rooted and are sensitive to excessively deep planting. Do not place fertilizer in the planting hole.

✍ Coarse pine bark mulch aids in the establishment of young blueberry plants. A good substrate for feeder roots can be provided by placing mulch 3 inches deep, extending 2 feet out from the plants in all directions. If plants are in a row, the pine bark strip should be 4 feet wide.

✍ The selection of the proper blueberry cultivars is one of the most important decisions that

a blueberry grower can make. Most blueberries are self unfruitful, requiring that more than one cultivar be planted in the same yard. This aids in cross pollination and helps to ensure maximum fruit production.

North Florida blueberry growers should choose mid to late season cultivars because they are much less susceptible to late winter freezes. “Tifblue,” “Brightwell,” “Powderblue” and “Woodard” have performed very well in north Florida and in the panhandle. Other mid to late - season rabbiteyes for trial include “Chaucer” and “Bluegem.”

✍ Once transplanted, blueberries will require frequent irrigation for several weeks, or until well established.

✍ Blueberries are not extremely heavy feeders, but some fertilization is often helpful. Think light, frequent applications, rather than heavy doses. They can be easily damaged or killed by over fertilization. Do not use standard garden and landscape fertilizers on blueberries. They often contain the nitrate nitrogen form of fertilizer, which is poisonous to this plant group. Instead, use an “azalea - camellia” or “blueberry special” type product.

Two to three light applications of fertilizer per year should be sufficient - one during spring, a second during midsummer and a third during early fall. Recommended rates are low when compared to the fertilization of other landscape plants. Even mature plants should receive no more than 3 ounces per application, and this amount should be spread evenly over a 4-foot diameter area.

✍ **Note to Wildlife enthusiasts:** I can’t figure why we aren’t using blueberry plants more for hedge and screen plantings. Properly spaced, they provide thick, informal growth habit that is a wildlife magnet. Though they experience some loss of leaves for a few weeks during the winter, they are never completely nude.

Question of the Week: Is mistletoe poisonous?

Answer: Yes, ingestion of the berries has caused poisoning and deaths of humans and livestock. The foliage has also been associated with the death of livestock, and has the potential for human poisoning. With the holiday season upon us, enjoy the mistletoe, but do not allow anyone to place any of the plant’s parts in their mouth. Be especially careful when using mistletoe as decoration if toddlers are present.